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DSS Scholarship Report

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My month in Hungary, two weeks of which were spent at Debrecen Summer School, made this past summer one of the best in my life so far. This trip was my first time traveling abroad by myself, and it had been an adventuring getting there, including canceled flights and unplanned layovers. I was exhausted from it all, but from the moment I rounded the corner and saw the beautiful façade of the main building with the fountains glimmering in the afternoon sun, I knew the Summer School was going to be a fantastic experience.

One of the first things I noticed was how excellently run the program was. From the very beginning, staff were present to give me all the information I needed and answer all my questions. Securing lodging and meals was made easy and hassle-free, which I found to be quite liberating, allowing me to focus on what was important: I had come to study Hungarian language and culture.

My previous Hungarian study was unique. I had picked up minor aspects like the alphabet, numbers, and simple verb conjugations from previous visits to the country, interactions with Hungarian friends, and a self-instructed guidebook. Then during the previous spring semester, I had tested into Beginning Hungarian II at Indiana University. Since I was living in Minnesota at the time, this course required me to participate via videoconference calling. While I loved working with the instructor and other students, I found the electronic equipment impaired my listening comprehension, making it difficult for me to participate in class conversations. I learned a substantial amount of grammar and vocabulary though, as the small class size allowed us to learn at a fast pace.

Nevertheless, this prior learning made my placement at the Summer School rather difficult. My grammar and written skills were significantly beyond my listening and speaking skills. To accommodate this discrepancy, I was placed in a level that started halfway through the Hungarolingua textbook that I had already completed through Indiana University, making the grammar portion of each day very easy for me. However, I found that I was only catching about 50% of what was being said and had a hard time expressing my thoughts in complete sentences. After the first few days of immersion, my understanding increased to

about 70-80% of what was said, which I found to be the perfect level to challenge me and teach me new vocabulary words but still allow me to participate in the conversation. I found that already being familiar with the grammar was a blessing in disguise because I could focus on listening and speaking skills, which are best facilitated by studying a language in its native country with native speakers. Grammar can be learned anywhere. Even so, my teachers were very helpful and understanding. One even let me borrow one of her exercise books so I could teach myself new grammar while she taught the class the grammar from the textbook I had already studied. She would answer any questions I had during breaks. In the end then, my learning experience was the best I could have hoped for.

In addition to the classroom activities, I enjoyed many of the extracurricular activities including Folk Nights, a cooking class, the excursion, and the bike tour. Again, I found this programming to be very well executed and very enjoyable. All the activities were great opportunities to learn about Hungarian culture, practice the language, and further friendships with my fellow classmates. I also had great experiences walking around Debrecen on my own and with my roommates. We discovered the delicious joys of Turo Rudi together and feasted on palacsinta on the Debrecen plaza one night. It's one of my favorite memories from the trip, watching the townspeople enjoy an evening under the beautifully lit Nagytemplom.

And now I come to my absolute favorite part of the whole experience at Debrecen Summer School: the classmates. I was surprised to learn that there were students from 39 countries around the world! In my small class alone, there were students from 6 different countries. I can't think of any of program that I or any of my friends have had an opportunity to participate in that brings together so many diverse people from so many different backgrounds and cultures. It was such a pleasure to learn from all these people through conversations and shared experiences about our differences and cultures. Even neater was the understanding that one thing bound us all together: our love for Hungary and our desire to learn the language and the culture! I am forever grateful for the friendships that were forged during my time at Debrecen Summer School, and I hope to return someday!

Finally, I can testify to the effectiveness of the teaching at Debrecen Summer School. During my subsequent two weeks of traveling and visiting friends, I found that I could have conversations with native speakers like I never could before!

I could communicate important information about meals and where the bathrooms were, but even better I could ask my friends about themselves in *their* language. I could answer their simple questions about me in *their* language. I discovered the joy of talking with my friends while they were relaxed, speaking in the own language, able to say all they wanted to express (whether or not I understood every detail). It made the rest of my time in Hungary extremely fulfilling.

Thank you so much to the scholarship benefactors that made this experience possible for me! Cheers to my best summer yet!